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from the October 27, 2004 edition

Let liberty transform Palestinians, too

By Scott Atran

GAZA CITY – In September, President Bush reasserted his commitment to the "road map" for Middle East peace, launched in 2003 to achieve a comprehensive Israeli-Palestinian agreement by 2005. He called on Palestinians to renounce terrorism, implicitly urged world leaders to cut ties to Yasser Arafat, and appealed to Israel to end "the daily humiliation" of Palestinians. He framed his remarks within an overall appeal for democracy in the Arab world, citing Iraq as a model of the "transformational power of liberty." In fact, for more than a year the US disastrously ignored Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's pleas to set up elections. Real democracy is the willingness to accept results we may not like.

US policy on a future Palestinian state is just as shortsighted. Israelis and Palestinians who have met with the National Security Council and State Department have come away certain that it is unofficial, but rock-solid, US policy to support Israel's stance that there can be no elections in the West Bank and Gaza as long as Mr. Arafat seems likely to be reelected.

A recent poll by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research found 54 percent of the 1,300 adults surveyed would vote for Arafat as president again. But the center's polls also suggest that Arafat would be politically weakened, because voters would replace older leaders in the legislative assembly with a younger majority that supports curtailing presidential powers. The center's director, Khalil Shikaki, has warned that without a democratic outlet, Palestinians may fall into civil war and militants will continue attacking Israel to maintain political prominence. That was also the message I

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took away from interviews with senior Israeli counterterrorism strategists, Palestinian leaders, would-be suicide bombers, and the families of suicide "martyrs."

Life in the occupied territories has never been as bad. Northern Gaza is a charred battlefield and almost every West Bank town is ringed by guns, barbed wire, and concrete. The economy is lifeless, except for Ramallah, seat of the Palestinian Authority's dysfunctional ministries - and the NGOs that bring some activity. Palestinians are convinced that Israeli army checkpoints - where people often wait for hours in shadeless no man's lands or long tunnels - are meant to break their will and drive them from the land. Israelis counter that they nab, on average, at least one suicide bomber a day at the checkpoints and that Palestinians confuse cause - suicide bombing - with effect - extreme vigilance to stop it.

The possibility of elections is the one sliver of hope many Palestinians cling to. This is exactly the sort of "peaceful means to achieve the rights of their people, and create the reformed institutions of a stable democracy" that President Bush touts as the only way to achieve peace. But instead of helping Palestinians prepare for elections, the US supports Israel's policy of assassinating Hamas leaders, isolating Arafat, and blocking elections.

On one level, the iron-fist policy is working. Data on suicide attacks collected by one of Israel's top military strategists, Gen. Isaac Ben Israel, reveals that Hamas operations have been severely disrupted, reducing suicide attacks to pre-intifada levels. He sees this creating a "window" to negotiate with moderate Palestinians who represent the majority's wish to have a Palestinian state alongside Israel. But with no popular and viable alternative to Arafat on the horizon, and no elections to let the Palestinians develop one, there is only a wall in front of the window. Like pounding mercury with a hammer, military responses alone breed only more decentralized, and less containable, forms of terrorism.

Many earnest middle-class students at Al-Najah University in Nablus - who provide more suicide bombers than any other demographic group in the country - agree that "martyrs give us dignity to free ourselves." Their attitudes underscore social science research showing that the best predictors of popular support for suicide attacks are lack of civil liberties and the unresponsiveness of one's own government.

In Gaza's Jabaliyah refugee camp, I interviewed the family of Nabeel Masood, the 16-year-old from Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades who exploded himself in Ashdod last April. Nabeel's mother was reading a letter from his school when I walked in the door. "Mr. and Mrs. Masood, it gives me great pleasure to inform you that your son Martyr Babel [sic], has passed his tests successfully in the 11th grade. He

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was first in his class. He was distinguished not only in his hard studying, sharing, and caring, but also in his good morals and manhood. I would really like to congratulate you for his unique success in both life and the hereafter. You should be proud of your son's martyrdom."

I asked his father, "Do you think your son's sacrifice will make things better?"

"No," he said, "this hasn't brought us even one step forward." He went on: "There must be two states, one for us and one for the Israelis. We love Arafat but we must elect new people now to do it, before we are all dead."

But for now, they can elect no one. The democratic right that the Israeli Knesset displayed Tuesday over the Gaza pullout, and that Americans will exercise in November, is denied to the Palestinians, a people for whom "the transformational power of liberty" is truly a matter of life or death.

• *Scott Atran, a research scientist at the National Center for Scientific Research in Paris and the University of Michigan, is author of 'In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion.'*

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